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CLEOPATRA



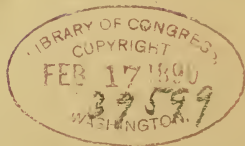
CLEOPATRA

BY J. C. J.

SAN FRANCISCO
THE BANCROFT COMPANY

1889

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Meeting of Antony and Cleopatra

[After the death of Cæsar, was formed the second Triumvirate, of which Marc Antony was the greatest. Having firmly established his power, he hastened to display its pomp. Passing over to Greece, and making some stay in Athens, he thence proceeded to Asia, journeying from kingdom to kingdom, attended by conquered monarchs, and giving away crowns and states with lavish hand. To exhibit now his glory, and render more brilliant still his triumph, he summoned Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, to appear before his Tribunal at Tarsus, to answer the charge of conspiracy against Rome; that she who had held Cæsar captive in her chains might bow to his power. In all the splendor of her beauty, most gorgeously displayed, the Semiramis of Egypt approached. Scorning the very appearance of homage the haughty Eastern syren came with the sole intention of captivating Antony. He, fascinated by her charms, forgot his ambition and became her willing slave.]

THE arms of the proud Roman had triumphed over all,
His eagle flew, victorious, o'er vanquished tower and wall;
The chiefs of the Athenians, the sovereigns of the East,
Honored his haughty progress, his stately train increased.
While tribute here he levied, a crown he there bestowed,
What wonder that this Consul with pride of conquest glowed?
What wonder, then, forgetting that I, whose proud blood came
From Cheops and Cephrenes, of Ptolemy's great name—
That I, upon whose bosom Love lay with pinions furled,
Had but to raise my eyelids to subjugate the world!—
What wonder, then, forgetting that I, of Pharaoh's line,
Unconquered monarch, reigned by right yet more divine—
By right of woman's beauty, than crown far higher power!
Forgetting this, he summoned, and set apart an hour
When I to him should answer at Tarsus, on the plea
Of treason 'gainst the city—'gainst Rome, conspiracy.

O Isis and Osiris ! I heaped your altars high !
I fed the black bull Apis, laughing at triumph nigh.
And swore, by sacred Nilus, by Typhon, and each god,
To measure with the Consul my smile against his sword ;
Thus make him feel still Egypt was queen in more than name,
And Cleopatra's sceptre more potent than his fame.
For, as in arms of Venus the fiery Mars lies still,
So knew I that this Roman would bow him to my will.
In galley bravely gilded, with sails of Tyrian dye,
And oars of silver sweeping to sound of melody,
Reclined I on rich cushions spangled with stars of gold,
Whose gleam my eyes' dark splendor outshone a thousand fold,
While rose and sank my bosom e'en as the swelling tide,
In languid, soft pulsation ; loose tresses ebon-dyed,
Fell heavy o'er the pillows, as drapery o'er me fell,
And veiled the curves voluptuous, which Cæsar loved so well ;
Rare fragrance of burnt incense, with breath of cassia blent,
Perfumed the airs that fanned me, with passion eloquent.
More fair than Trojan Helen, I, Egypt's Empress, came,
In all Astarte's glory, the Roman's pride to tame.
The head of the Triumvirs, he, proudest of the three,
Gazed on me but one moment—then bowed him down to me.
Like as the snows on Atlas down to the heated plain,
Beneath the rays of Phœbus, in torrents rush amain,
So, melted by my beauty—the radiance of my smile—
He poured his soul before me, Echantress of the Nile !
And, as that Nile uprises and floods the thirsty field,
So did I, Ethiop's sovereign, love to the Roman yield.
As doth the amorous sunbeam the dewy flower-cup sip,
Within his arms he held me, and feasted on my lip ;
Draining Love's sweet elixir, I sank in his embrace ;
Then with moist lips half-parted, I gazed upon his face !
Lips breaking into laughter, blood-red with passion's fire,
Now, curved with scornful triumph—now, warm with strong desire ;
Laughing that Roma's proudest lay captive in my arms,
Reveling in the lover won by a woman's charms,
Exulting that though Cæsar above his queen loved fame,
This more impetuous soldier my kiss alone could tame,

So, lighting flames far brighter than e'er on altar shone,
Till he, the world's great Tribune, knew but my will alone.
No stern, ice-blooded Cæsar, no calculating lord
Weighing 'gainst Cleopatra his honor and his sword—
But Antony, a hero, for whom my crown and throne
Were doubly worth the losing so that *his* love were won !
Like very gods we feasted, the sparkling wine outpoured ;
Still sacrificed to Bacchus, as Eros we adored.
Wrapped in his warm embraces, while Sirius lit the dome,
What cared I then for Egypt, or what cared he for Rome ?
He held—Rome's haughtiest Consul—*this*, every boon above,
By my rich kiss made royal, immortal by my love.
My fragrant breath inhaling, which e'er inflamed anew,
The frenzied blood sent molten his throbbing pulses through.
Half maddened by the rapture, his touch's magic charm,
I clasped, and kissed, and held him to fire, delight, and calm.
So lay we, steeped in pleasure, till dawn had veiled the stars,
I yielding love like Venus to him, my Roman Mars,
Until the war-note's summons died 'mid soft music rare,
While breath of lotus-blossom grew faint on odorous air ;
Till he, who came to conquer, lay conquered by my side—
Gave up for Cleopatra, the world, his fame, his bride,
Of all my glorious triumphs, this shall the lustre dim ;
He, Latium's conquering Consul—I, conqueror of him !



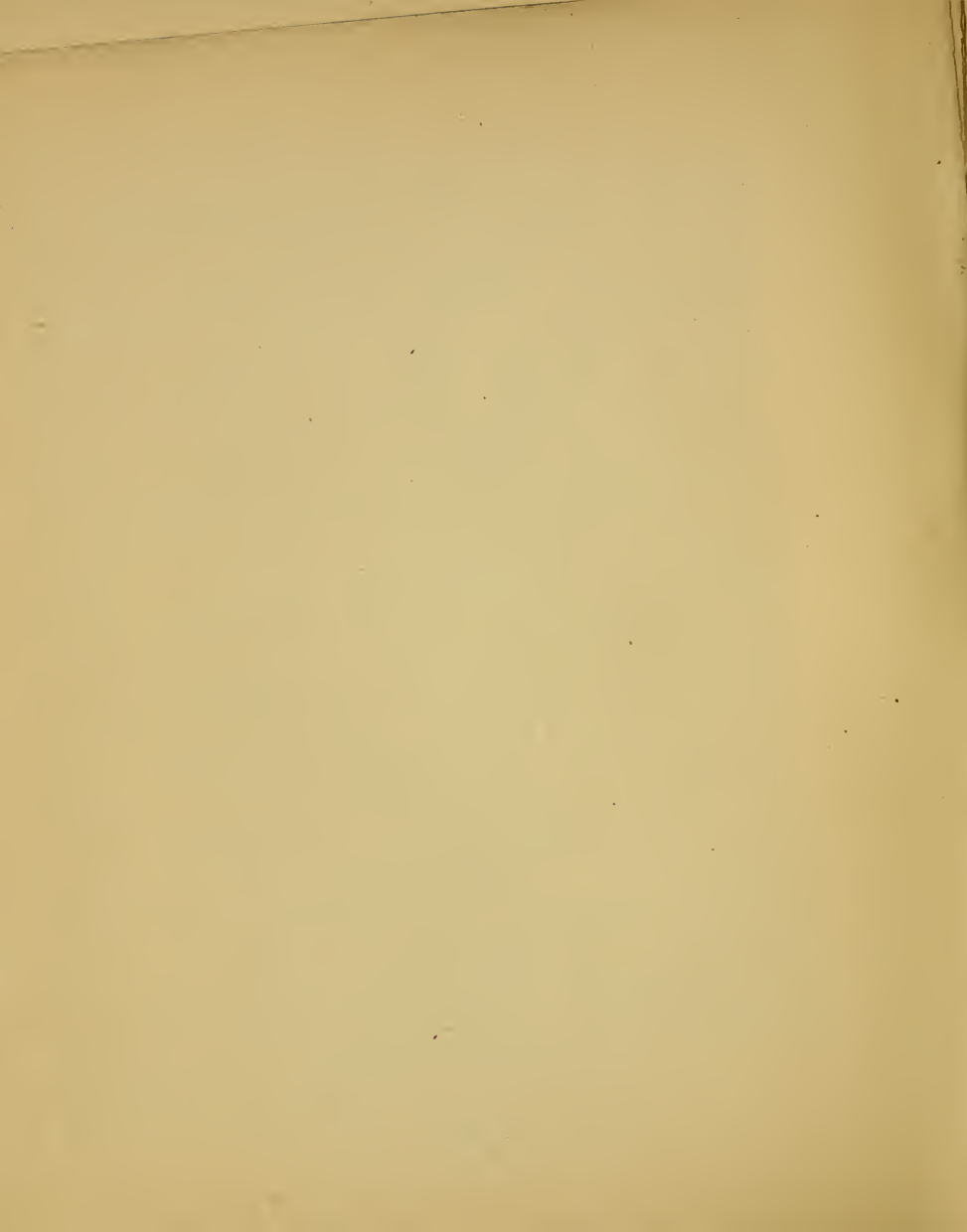
Death of Cleopatra

WHY tarries thus my Tribune? The weighted hours drag on.
'Tis æons; slave! I tell you, since Antony is gone.
Now, by the hide of Apis! by Isas' sacred veil!
The walls of Rome shall totter before the Tribune fail!
I fear not haughty Cæsar; my heart his power disdains;
The pale blood of Octavia creeps in her brother's veins,
While he who once with Egypt has piled Love's altar high,
Remembering her caresses, may Egypt's foes defy.
Fling wide the casement, Iris! and, Charmian, bring the steel
That once my Roman wielded; I would its sharpness feel.
Ye gods! that Pharaoh's daughter in place of son should stand,
To fight like fettered tigress, while others draw the brand!
With lips, twin flames of passion, with eyes that shame the stars,
With form of Grecian Helen, yet bear I heart of Mars!
I'd fling my crown to Nilus, and kneel to sacred night,
To know that haughty Cæsar acknowledged Egypt's might.
Hark to the clash of metal—the bray of trumpet loud—
How dare the fools this tumult? What means this surging crowd?
Why droops Rome's stately standard—staffless, and stained, and torn?
Why lags the slave that bears it? Not thus should it be borne,
But in the teeth of triumph, and floating on the wind,
With victory around it, and conquered field behind.
Off with the slave to torture, while you who cower nigh—
Hist, hist! 'tis "Actium!" "Actium!" 'tis "Antony!" they cry.
'Tis news of triumph, surely! none other dare he send—
That banner was the Cæsar's, or Lepidus', his friend.
Perhaps e'en now the Tribune hastes hither to my feet;
Bind up my tresses, Nea, ere Antony I meet.

How stirs the blood within me, when they but call his name!
At thought of his embraces my pulses leap in flame!
I live but half my being until again I taste
The rapture of thy kisses—haste, Antony! oh, haste!
Bring out the regal purple—bring out my diadem!
I'll tire me for the victor with every flaming gem.
Though fair as Aphrodite at Tarsus, when we met
In city of Serapis, my charms are potent yet.
When, flushed with pride of conquest, the consul summons sent
That Egypt should attend him, in conscious power I went.
Each met to slay the other, and each became the slain,
But, by the great Osiris! I'd die that death again!
O, that wild night on Cydnus, when Sirius shone above,
We poured out full libations, and owned no god but Love!
Then maddened by the rapture of passion's frenzied glow,
We burned with fiercer fires than Isis' altars know.
Scorning all other triumphs, he reveled in my charms,
While all the world I cared for I held within my arms.
That night e'en gods might envy! Come, Antony, once more.
I'll rouse my throbbing pulses, like wine my kisses pour!
Now, by the throne of Pharaoh, let fame, ambition slip!
For Egypt longs to clasp you, an empire, on her lip.
The lotus-perfumed breezes blow soft o'er reedy Nile;
Our Alexandrian revels and Cleopatra's smile
Await to greet the victor. Hark, hark! that odious shout!
It hath a sound like "Ruin!" There Charmian, list without.
Who dares to couple ruin with the Triumvir's name?
Or who dares cry "Disaster!" and blare forth Egypt's shame?
Ha! by our sire, Sesostris! by every Ptolemy!
I'll teach the slaves a lesson when comes Marc Antony.
Perchance that pale Octavia hath chilled with cold embrace
The martial blood within him. Her frozen, marble face
Hath turned to ice his fires; thus some mischance hath come.
Then needed he his Egypt, to thaw that frost of Rome,
But he, the great Triumvir, and Cleopatra's lord
Hath won too many triumphs to fall 'neath Cæsar's sword.
Ho, guards! enforce a silence! When next the rabble cry
They'll cheer the mighty Tribune, and hail his victory.

Ha, Charmian, some word passed thee and smote upon mine ear;
Speak out. Why dost thou falter? Shall I, an empress, fear?
The Circe of old Egypt, the serpent of the Nile,
Though every god desert her, can Death himself beguile.
Speak quick! again!—Thou liest! What, dead!—the Tribune dead!—
Forsaking Cleopatra—is *that* what thou has said?
Out, out! thou brazen liar! Serapis' self might shrink
To tear my lover from me. I'd snatch him from the brink
Of that dark, awful region. I hear! 'tis true—again!
“Fallen the Great Triumvir, on his own weapon slain!”
I *knew* no paltry Cæsar could lower this Roman's crest;
His *own* steel drew the torrent—none other pierced his breast.
He, o'er himself sole victor, hath gone with dauntless tread.
For us a colder Cydus in Stygian shades to spread,
What could the gods grant better, O Antony, than this—
To live in arms of Egypt, and die for Egypt's kiss?
Shall I survive my kingdom—a queen undone, discrowned?
Shall minion of an upstart, a Ptolemy be found?
What though Octavius seek me, it were in truth disgrace
Should puppet of an empire usurp the sovereign's place.
Old Egypt's proud Astarte hath held too high a sway—
For whom one conqueror languished, one held a world at bay.
Come hither, Charmian! Nea! Prepare my regal state;
I go to wake Serapis, and banquet with my mate.
Bare once again my bosom; these smooth, warm limbs unveil;
Perfume my dusky tresses; tinge where the rich hues pale;
For even now Serapis his shadow o'er me flings;
I'd go as fits the daughter of Egypt's mighty kings.
There throw the gauze about me. Look, Iras, that I be
Fair to myself at Tarsus, to meet Marc Antony.
Now for the last caresses! Ah, gods! with closer clasp,
And sweeter lip than lover's, clings to my breast the asp.
The lotos scents oppress me—I see Canopus shine!
So! Death alone is royal, and only Love divine!

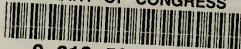








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